

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 883

CS 207 223

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TITLE Teaching Sentence Structure and Versatility.
INSTITUTION Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational
Research and Development, Los Alamitos, Calif.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 7p.
JOURNAL CIT SWRL Instructional Improvement Digest; n4 1981
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Secondary Education; *Sentence
Combining; *Sentence Structure; Skill Development;
Teaching Methods; *Writing Exercises; *Writing
Instruction

ABSTRACT

Sentence combining can teach students one of the most difficult aspects of the writing process--how to construct effective, versatile sentences. In sentence combining exercises, students take a series of short sentences and combine them into a longer and more elaborate sentence in such a way that the important information from each short sentence is retained. To help a less competent writer who might not combine the short sentences into the most effective sentence possible, signals such as underlining and connectives in parentheses may be inserted in the sentences. Sentence combining exercises can incorporate a wide variety of structures--noun modifiers, noun substitutes, and adverbials. Sentence combining succeeds because of its basis in students' oral language abilities, its independence of knowledge of grammatical terms, and students' enjoyment of sentence combining exercises. Although sentence combining is an effective technique, it is not a complete program for teaching writing, and should take no more than 15 minutes of class time per day. Such exercises can be drawn from a variety of sources other than commercial publishers. (HTH)

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TEACHING SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND VERSATILITY

SWRL Instructional Improvement Digest

No. 4

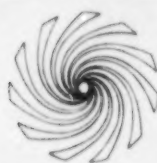
1981

Adrienne S. Escoe
Editor

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TEACHING SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND VERSATILITY

Teaching students how to be good writers requires direct instruction and practice on a variety of complex tasks. For example, students must learn how to generate, select, and arrange their ideas. They must learn how to transcribe those ideas into written text, and they must learn how to revise and edit their writing. One of the most difficult aspects of this complex process is learning how to construct effective, versatile sentences. In any piece of writing, sentences carry the substance of the writer's meaning. They are critical to the success of a written piece. Yet direct instruction on crafting versatile sentences is conspicuously absent from most classrooms. And it shows.

Teachers at all levels—from the primary grades to college—recognize a common shortcoming in their students' writing: a limited repertoire of sentence structures. In attempting to avoid errors, students try to stay on safe ground, constructing sentences with the bare minimum—a subject, a verb, and an object. Such short sentences are fine in company with other sentence structures, but as a steady diet, they make dull reading. And they are really not as structurally "safe" as they appear to be. Because the ideas being communicated in a composition are often difficult and cumbersome to convey in subject-verb-object sentences, the probability of including fragments, run-ons, and other common faults is greatly increased.

How Can We Teach Versatile Sentence Structures?

In the past we have tried to teach sentence structure through grammar exercises. We've introduced students to a baffling array of grammatical terms. We've asked students to underline subjects, predicates, and prepositional phrases. We've had them draw circles around adverbs, adjectives, and conjunctions. In short, we've assigned countless exercises that required students to analyze and dissect sentences. The limitation of this approach is that it doesn't deal with the real act of writing. When you write, you put sentences together. You don't take them apart.

This is not to say that we shouldn't teach grammar. Obviously, if we're going to teach sentence structure, we're going to be teaching grammar. But what we need is a kind of "applied" grammar—a grammar that doesn't get bogged down in technical terms. We need a practical means for showing students how to construct—not dissect—sentences. At the same time, we also need a technique that teaches students to use the rich variety of sentence structures that is available in the English language.

Fortunately, educational research has identified a way to do this. The technique is commonly known as "sentence combining" although this term actually sells the instruction short. Sentence combining teaches both sound sentence structure and versatility.

What Is Sentence Combining?

The basic idea is very simple: Students take a series of short sentences and combine them into a longer and more elaborate sentence. The point is to combine the sentences in such a way that the important information from each short sentence is retained. There are several ways this can be done. For example, a poor writer might combine the following three sentences by simply stringing them together with *and*:

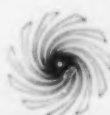
Mosquitoes are insects.
The insects are tiny.
The insects spread many diseases.

→ Mosquitoes are insects,
and they are tiny, and they
spread many diseases.

However, a more competent writer would probably reduce the second sentence to a simple adjective, and the third sentence to a relative clause:

Mosquitoes are insects.
The insects are tiny.
The insects spread many diseases.

→ Mosquitoes are tiny
insects that spread many
diseases.



The question is how do we get the poor writer to use the same kind of structures that the competent writer uses. In sentence-combining exercises, we provide a set of signals that tell the student exactly what procedures to use to put the sentences together. Using the previous example, let's examine how the signals work:

- This is the example with the sentence-combining signals added.

} Mosquitoes are insects. The insects are <u>tiny</u> . The insects spread many diseases. (that)
--
- First the student inserts the underlined word tiny into the sentence above it. The rest of the second sentence is discarded.

} Mosquitoes are tiny insects. The insects spread many diseases. (that)
--
- Next, the student moves the word in parentheses (that) to the beginning of the line on which it appears.

} Mosquitoes are tiny insects. (that) the insects spread many diseases

- The student then deletes the phrase the insects, since insects already appears in the first sentence.

} Mosquitoes are tiny insects. that spread many diseases

- Finally, the student joins the second line to the first sentence.

} Mosquitoes are tiny insects that spread many diseases.
--

It isn't necessary for students to write down each intermediate step in the combining process. These steps can be expressed orally. It's also unnecessary for students to label or describe the combining procedures. The signals eliminate the need for grammatical terms, allowing students to concentrate on building mature, complete sentences—the kinds of sentences we would like to see students using in their own writing.

The example below illustrates the use of another sentence-combining signal, the capitalized word **SOMETHING**. This signal is used as a "place-holder" that marks the spot where a phrase or sentence is to be inserted:

The divers knew **SOMETHING**.
There were sharks in the area. (that)

Here's how this signal works:

- The student moves the word in parentheses to the beginning of the second sentence. (Since there are no words repeated in the second sentence, nothing has to be deleted.)

} The divers knew SOMETHING . that there were sharks in the area
--
- Then the student inserts the second line into the place marked by **SOMETHING** in the first sentence.

} The divers knew that there were sharks in the area.

What Kind of Sentence Structures Can We Teach?

Using the three signals explained above—underlining, parentheses, and **SOMETHING**—sentence-combining exercises can incorporate a wide variety of structures. The examples below illustrate some of the possibilities.

• Noun Modifiers

Jack likes peanut butter.
The peanut butter is crunchy. → Jack likes crunchy peanut butter.

The girl is my sister.
The girl is standing on the porch. → The girl standing on the porch is my sister.

The police caught the burglar.
The burglar stole the jewels. (who) → The police caught the burglar who stole the jewels.

• Noun Substitutes

We knew **SOMETHING**.
We would win. (that) → We knew that we would win.

SOMETHING worries me.
We are almost out of time. (The fact that) → The fact that we are almost out of time worries me.

SOMETHING is a mystery.
The pirates hid the treasure. (Where) → Where the pirates hid the treasure is a mystery.

• Adverbials

- I finished the test.
The bell rang. (before) → I finished the test before the bell rang.
- You study hard. (If)
You will pass the course. → If you study hard, you will pass the course.
- Frodo clutched the ring.
Frodo was caught in its evil spell. → Frodo clutched the ring, caught in its evil spell.

Although this outline is by no means comprehensive, it should provide an idea of the range of structures that can be taught through sentence-combining instruction. However, if sentence combining depended solely on two-sentence exercises, its effect would probably be small. The point of sentence combining is to work up to exercises that require several different types of combining techniques. For example, the following exercise was used successfully in a fourth-grade program:

- The farmer told him
SOMETHING.
He found a chicken. (that)
The chicken was magical.
The chicken laid eggs. → The farmer told him that he found a magical chicken that laid rainbow-colored eggs.
(that)
The eggs were rainbow-colored.
(Perron, 1974, p. 263)

Why Does Sentence Combining Work?

Several reasons have been suggested for the success of sentence combining. First, sentence combining is firmly based on students' oral language abilities. Children are remarkable "language machines." Even very young children are capable of comprehending and producing some very sophisticated sentence structures in their oral language. Through sentence-combining practice, we are simply asking students to apply this oral sentence sense to their writing. As students work through sentence-combining exercises, they should be encouraged to say their responses out loud. A practical test of whether or not a response is acceptable is whether it "sounds right" to the student, rather than whether or not it conforms to some abstract grammatical form.

Second, sentence combining does not depend upon knowledge of grammatical terms—those same terms that generations of students have labored over, groaned about, and ultimately failed to learn. The "grammar-free" signals illustrated above release students from the burden of memorizing confusing terms. In sentence-combining exercises, the emphasis is on producing good sentences, rather than on describing them.

Finally, sentence combining works because students enjoy it. Studies have shown that students approach sentence combining with the same enthusiasm that they have for puzzles and games. Students are motivated to solve the exercises because there is an intrinsic challenge to find out what the sentences say.

How Can We Use Sentence Combining in the Classroom?

Although sentence combining is an effective technique for teaching sentence structure and versatility, it is *not* a complete program for teaching writing. For example, sentence-combining practice is not the best way to help students with many important aspects of the composing process such as defining audience and purpose, generating ideas, or revising (see *IID* No. 2 "Write Now—Change Later: Teaching Students to Revise," 1981). In short, sentence combining is no substitute for independent writing. With this limitation in mind, let's look at some suggestions for using sentence combining in a writing class.

- Sentence-combining practice should take up no more than about 15 minutes of class time per day, up to a maximum of 75 minutes per week. Nevertheless, sentence combining should be a *regular* part of instruction, not just a now-and-then activity. Exercises can be scheduled on a daily basis, or perhaps three times a week, but they should be done regularly.
- Sentence-combining exercises can be drawn from many different sources. Although several sentence-combining textbooks are available from commercial publishers, a sentence-combining program does not have to depend only on commercial materials. You might try designing some of your own exercises, using topics that interest your students: school events, holidays, television shows, movies, or sports. The idea is to make the exercises interesting so that students will be motivated to solve them. For example, you can include students' names in the exercises:

Roscoe, Todd, and Scott think SOMETHING.
Some lessons are weird. (that)
They talk about people in their room! (because)
(Perron, 1974, p. 229)

Exercises can also be adapted from literature, or from newspaper and magazine articles. Students can then compare their sentences to the original version. Content from other school subject areas, such as social studies or science, can easily be transformed into sentence-combining exercises. Sentences taken from students' compositions can

also be used. Some students might even want to try writing their own exercises, which they can then exchange with classmates.

- Students should experience success with sentence combining. The technique can be introduced with simple two-sentence exercises, gradually working up to longer problems. Then several exercises can be combined into a short paragraph, so that students can explore the logical relationships among sentences. In the following example, short sentences are grouped together, with each group representing one sentence-combining exercise. When each of the groups is combined, the resulting sentences can be arranged in paragraph form:

CRISPUS ATTUCKS

Crispus Attucks was a sailor.
The sailor was Black.
The sailor was American.
The sailor lived in Boston in 1770. (who)

One day Crispus and a crowd of colonists marched toward some soldiers.
The colonists were angry.
The soldiers were British.

The soldiers thought SOMETHING.
The colonists were going to attack them. (that)

Suddenly, the soldiers began to fire at the crowd.
The soldiers were outnumbered.
The crowd was hostile.

The shooting had stopped. (When)
Crispus Attucks lay dead on the ground.

Crispus Attucks was a Black American sailor who lived in Boston in 1770. One day, Crispus and a crowd of angry colonists marched toward some British soldiers. The soldiers thought that the colonists were going to attack them. Suddenly, the outnumbered soldiers began to fire at the hostile crowd. When the shooting had stopped, Crispus Attucks lay dead on the ground.

Paragraph-length exercises can also be used as "story-starters." After students have combined the sentences, they can write additional paragraphs of their own to complete the story.

- Although the signals outlined above are easy to learn and use, they are not the only method available for structuring sentence-combining practice. Some teachers prefer to use a modeling technique. For example, if we wanted to teach relative clauses (although we wouldn't use this technical term with students), we could orally model several exercises similar to the following:

Jerry owns a dog.
The dog can do tricks. → Jerry owns a dog that can do tricks.

Students quickly catch on to the combining operations once they have heard and recited a few examples. Then they are ready to practice the operations on their own, perhaps in conjunction with other operations that have been introduced previously:

Jerry owns a dog.
The dog is little.
The dog can do tricks. → Jerry owns a little dog that can do tricks.

- Structured exercises—whether they are signaled or modeled—form the core of sentence-combining instruction. However, students should also experiment with "open," unsignaled problems. Such exercises give students a chance to be creative—a chance to explore the stylistic effects of various sentence-combining operations. For example, the sentences below can be combined in many different ways:

The ashtray squats.
The ashtray is fat.
The ashtray is ugly.
The ashtray is in the middle of the table.
(Strong, 1973, p. 13)

Here are two possible solutions to this exercise. Notice the stylistic differences between the two solutions:

The fat, ugly ashtray squats in the middle of the table.	In the middle of the table, the ashtray squats, fat and ugly.
--	---

By comparing alternative solutions such as these, students can begin to get a feel for the influence of sentence structure on style. Class discussions can focus on why one combination seems to work better than another in a certain situation. Again, the emphasis is not on which sentence is right, but on which sentence sounds better in a given context.

We know that students enjoy sentence combining, and that teachers find it easy to use. More important, we know that sentence combining is a proven technique for helping students develop versatile sentences. And, most important of all, we know that students who have acquired that distinctive ability to use a rich variety of effective sentence structures are well on their way to becoming good writers.

References

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—Joseph Lawlor,
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Comments

On Teaching Sentence Structure and Versatility

The concepts presented in "Teaching Sentence Structure and Versatility" are familiar and useful. Teachers often presume that students know them. But, as Lawlor points out, sentence structure and versatility remain common weak areas in students' writing. This article presents *Digest* readers with a most important review.

Improvement in written expression is a priority item in the Anaheim Union High School District's English program. We welcome and appreciate any help which will assist our teachers achieve this goal. I look forward to sharing the *Digest* with my colleagues.

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More on Teaching Sentence Structure and Versatility

Sentence combining is a creative and imaginative way to motivate and improve student writing. Grammar does not teach writing. The very etymology of the word (*grammar*, Greek for *something that is written*) indicates that we are putting the cart before the horse when we attempt to teach writing by teaching grammar first. Grammar, however, is so neat and measurable, so perfect for competency tests that we can easily get carried away with the idea that we are teaching something very useful when we teach grammar. Well, we are—much as shop teachers are teaching something very useful when they insist that their students label the tools and the

machine parts they are to manipulate. But shop teachers do not teach these labeling skills in a vacuum. They have a hands-on approach that gives all the labels immediate relevance for their students. In much the same way, writing teachers need to give their students something to manipulate. That *something* is the writing that students produce as a result of creative techniques such as sentence combining, clustering, and visualization exercises.

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Sentence combining has had an enormous success in the classroom. Teachers have hailed its usefulness both for writing and for grammar instruction. However, teachers should be aware that it is not a complete program in itself. It has serious problems that limit its usefulness. First, sentence combining treats sentences out of context. It is context which determines how a sentence should begin and end, and whether it should be long or short. Second, content, purpose, and audience are all more important in determining the shape of sentences than any extrinsic measure of length. Third, sentence combining tends to produce longer sentences and assumes that these are necessarily better. Students who have been praised for producing long sentences are baffled when university teachers reward short, crisp sentences. Finally, there is no evidence that practice with sentences in books has much effect on the overall quality of students' writing. Examples should always be drawn from their own

work—a guiding principle for all revision exercises in writing classes.

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A Question About the Digest

We are receiving the *Instructional Improvement Digest* and offer congratulations on the pertinent, helpful content of each issue. We would, however, like to learn how we are so fortunate to be on your mailing list. Can you inform me about frequency of publication, membership, and cost of the *Digest*?

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Editor's Note:

To reach a wide audience of educators who can put into practice the courses of action described in the *Digest*, we have tried to develop a mailing list which represents a cross section of teachers and administrators in the geographic region we serve (Southern California, Arizona, Clark County, Nevada). Our plan has been to publish the *Digest* on an occasional basis, about four to six issues each year. Single copies are free upon request, and we encourage reproduction of the *Digest*, distribution to other educators, and inservice presentation.

Readers' comments are always welcome.